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Books Worth Reading

Disciplined Minds: A Critical Look at the Salaried Professionals and the Soul-Battering System that Shapes their Lives

By Jeff Schmidt

Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc.

Jeff Schmidt has a Ph.D. in physics from the University of California and was (until he was fired over publication of this book) an editor at *Physics Today*. Drawing from his experience in graduate

school and a driving curiosity about the very nature of higher education in America, Schmidt has written a soul-battering book.

About the typical graduate school experience he writes, “A system that turns potentially independent thinkers into politically subordinate clones is as bad for society as it is for the stunted individuals. It bolsters the power of the corporations and other hierarchical organizations, undermining democracy.... It does this by producing people who are useful to hierarchies and only to hierarchies: uncritical employees ready and able to extend the reach of their employers will. At the same time, a system in which individuals do not make a significant difference at their point of deepest involvement in society—that is, at work—undermines efforts to build a culture of real democracy.”

It gets worse. Schmidt argues that, contrary to popular belief, college graduates prove to be more easily manipulated than their less-educated contemporaries. He cites studies showing that during the Korean and Vietnam wars the better educated citizens were actually more “hawkish” than the general population and that this was the result of the mechanical thinking inherent in higher education.

Schmidt argues that even the stereotype of the liberal professor (a type who constitute only about five percent of full-time college faculty) is at odds with how these professors actually behave on the job—they are apt to be far more conservative and authoritarian in their workplace demeanor than their ideology would imply. “[W]hile professionals are tolerant of distant social criticism,” he writes, “they have little tolerance for anyone who tries to provoke a debate about the politics that guide their own work.”

Schmidt observes that, as work becomes more and more ideological, those admitted into professional work are themselves more and more selected on their apparent willingness to accept a strict adherence “to an assigned point of view.” Thus, he argues, it should not be surprising that one of the key characteristics of professional employees is ideological obedience and intellectual timidity. When you consider that the number of people regarded as professionals has gone from 5 percent of the population since the 1920s to a recent estimate of 27 percent, this is cause for alarm.

Schmidt says professionals go further than just agreeing to carry out their employers' instructions: "They also sell their ideological labor power, their ability to extend those instructions to new situations. It is this sale that distinguishes them from nonprofessionals, who sell only their ordinary labor. Those in charge can trust professionals to make some decisions that must be made ideologically; nonprofessionals are trusted to make only decision that can be made mechanically."

Such attitudes appear in the workplace as matters of turf. When a "nonprofessional" but dynamic employee, for example, chooses to make a decision that seems like the right thing to do but is ideologically out of sync with the employer's policy, the decision will be reversed with a vengeance whether it was the right thing to do or not. Moreover, employees who have made such decisions will be told in no uncertain terms that they are not "professionals" and are warned not to try to act that way.

As Schmidt sees it, professionals rarely have more real authority than nonprofessionals; they merely have an operational grasp of the ideology particular to their profession. He says professionals can't even be "properly called critical thinkers," as they inherently avoid risk. Perhaps it is more appropriate, he suggests, to call them "ideologically disciplined thinkers." Taking a bold stance, Schmidt dares to assert that in most disciplines the actual technical skills required to do the job can be picked up quickly while working (even in fields like medicine) but what the years of mind-numbing classroom attendance accomplish is to molding ideologically disciplined minds.

Okay, are you as depressed as I am at this point? This is indeed a dismal view of higher education. It's even worse when you consider the stakes involved in lifetime employment and the fault lines of stress that exist between professionals and nonprofessionals. In a chapter titled "Resisting Indoctrination," Schmidt writes, "One might not expect organizations as different as the Unification Church and the U.S. Marine Corps to have much in common, but rank-and-file Moonies and Marines are alike in one important way: they are not distracted by ideas of their own." Well, I don't know anything about Moonies, but I spent four years in the Marines. Schmidt will get no argument from of me on this statement. One of his main points about surviving graduate school is analogous to the

experience of a POW: survival may not be as important a question as what kind of a person you will be when you get out.

Professional training, according to Schmidt, takes a great toll on individuals while it simultaneously lessens sensitivity to elitism, makes people risk averse, and renders them overly compliant. In essence, what Schmidt believe that what really matters in a global sense is not who does the work that changes society for the better but “how much of it actually gets done.” No argument from me on this issue, either. If you have a stake in higher education or consider yourself a “professional” you should read *Disciplined Minds*.

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